

# WOMAN SOLDIER, *QUO VADIS?*

by

SUZANNE S. BOENING

**I**n September 1982, the United States Army announced a major policy change governing its utilization of women. On the basis of a study conducted by the Women in the Army Policy Review Group,<sup>1</sup> the Army is preparing to take two courses of action that appear to be at cross purposes with each other. It will *increase* the number of women authorized in the force structure while *decreasing* the number of Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) open to women and the specific areas of activity to which they may be assigned.

The Army's plan is to increase the number of enlisted women in the force from 65,000 to 70,000 over the next five years.<sup>2</sup> This figure of 70,000 is based on a projection of jobs available for women. And yet, concurrent with this increase in authorization, new policies will decrease the number and kinds of jobs open to Army women. In an effort to reduce the probability of women being exposed to direct combat, the Army has added 23 additional MOSs to the list of specialties closed to females. And new physical strength requirements are being developed that may "bar most women from 76 percent of Army jobs."<sup>3</sup>

This is curious. One would expect that an increase in authorization would be based on an expanded role for women or, conversely, that new restrictions would lead to a reduction in total authorization. The Women in the Army Policy Review Group did not explicitly recommend either an increase or a decrease in the total number of women to be authorized, but an increase would seem to be difficult to justify, considering the recommended restrictions. Perhaps what we have here is an attempt to placate both the militant

feminist and her (or his) more conservative counterpart by making policy designed to appeal to both. But if that's the case, the result will satisfy neither.

We in the Army are making trouble for ourselves with such seemingly contradictory policy. In a time when there is a push for standardization, we are creating a special class of soldier who is not interchangeable with her peers. We are increasing the need for individual management while talking of unit replacement. We are adding to our distribution problems, constraining reassignments, and creating both oversubscribed and undersubscribed MOSs.

The Women in the Army study is only the latest of many studies (too many) done on the subject, and the controversy surrounding the delay in its release as well as its substance<sup>4</sup> practically guarantees that it will not be the last. Who knows how long this latest policy change will remain in effect or how soon women, and the Army, will be jerked around again in an effort to—to do what? Perhaps there's the rub. What is the real goal of our latest policy? What has been the real reason for each of our past policies? Upon what philosophical base and to what logical end have our various policies on the utilization of women been formed?

We have not had an articulated, coherent set of assumptions on the role of women in the Army since the early days of the Women's Army Corps (when the wartime mission was to release men for combat, and the peacetime mission was to form a nucleus of trained personnel that was capable of rapid expansion in the event of mobilization). In the early 1970s, partly because of pressures associated with forming an all-volunteer

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force, the Army was cast in the role of social agent in the movement for women's equality. Since that time, official policy has seesawed between maximizing opportunities for women and minimizing danger to those women and their units. But it is difficult to formulate policy without some basic assumptions on the nature of the subject at hand. To do so is likely to result in a series of inconsistent decisions, each based on the pressure of the moment. In order to steer clear—if I may borrow a naval metaphor—of the Scylla of sex discrimination and the Charybdis of women in body bags, the Army has been forced to base policy on the expediency of the moment. Army leadership has been pressured to please ardent feminists demanding the right of women to be treated the same way that men are treated, and at the same time not offend their more conservative brothers and sisters who want women out of fatigues and back behind their typewriters.

It is one thing, of course, to recognize that we need a set of assumptions on the role of women in the Army and quite another to identify, or choose, those assumptions. They are part of a larger set of assumptions on the nature of woman—a confusing, emotional, political issue—but choose we must. We must give ourselves a philosophical platform upon which we can build a logical, consistent policy that is understandable to, and defensible before, Congress, the media, and ultimately the American public.

There would seem to be four basic ways of looking at the role of women, four broad philosophies that are at the root of the major arguments heard today and throughout history—innatism, matriarchy, feminism, and differential equality.<sup>5</sup> In examining these underlying philosophies, we might profitably ask ourselves three questions: What influence has each view had on the perceived role of women in the Army? What does each position offer as a possible future basis for Army policy? And how could each be applied to the subject of women in combat?

- *Innatism—woman as physically and mentally inferior.*

This philosophy considers woman to be *innately* inferior. To the innatist, the female is perceived as smaller, weaker, more easily hurt, prone to nervous instability, and adversely affected by hormonal fluctuations. Because she is so inferior to the male, yet so necessary to the survival of the species, the welfare of society demands that she be protected by the male—her father, husband, brother, or guardian. Because of her weaker nervous system and hormonal fluctuations, she needs male supervision and guidance, perhaps even restraint.

This philosophy has been inculcated in most of us to a greater or lesser degree. It is the basis for many of our customs, protective laws, and mores. Young people today may laugh (or shudder) at its Victorian-era excesses, but many of the age group that provides our senior leadership are attracted to the traditional conservative values it champions when adopted in a more moderate form.

A believer in the more radical form of innatism would probably see no role at all for women in uniform. He would view the Army as a man's world, totally unsuited for the delicate, sensitive female nature. He might allow nurses to accompany the Army (since nursing is definitely "woman's work"), but there would be no necessity for them to be an integral part of the military structure. Even the moderate view that allowed the creation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (the WAAC) and then the integration of women in the Regular Army (the WAC) reflected a firm basis in innatism. Major General Jeanne Holm tells us that "from the outset, all the

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services tended to treat enlisted women like immature girls in a boarding school, away from home for the first time.”<sup>6</sup> The role of the woman in that Army was very clear: She was a volunteer substitute for a soldier, performing traditional clerical or medical duties behind the lines and thus releasing a “real” soldier for combat.

While such views are generally described today as old-fashioned and unenlightened, the innatist view of women is alive and well, if officially quiet. Many men and some women in uniform believe that the military has overstepped the bounds of good sense in its desire to function as an equal opportunity employer. They argue for a more restricted role for women in the Army, maintaining that female soldiers are not interchangeable with male soldiers.<sup>7</sup> In 1980 General Westmoreland put it this way:

In order to make the numbers look better, this administration has told the services to recruit more and more women . . . . The people who are making these judgments don't know what they are talking about. The personnel in the Pentagon and in this administration have lost track of their priorities. They're using the military as a vehicle for social change, disregarding the *raison d'être* for a military force.<sup>8</sup>

• *Matriarchy—woman as superior to man.*

This philosophy places woman at the pinnacle of evolutionary development. Matriarchists, or “superior” feminists, hold that the female, in all orders of life, represents a higher stage of development than the male.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with data from the insect world (where the queen bee is the focus of the entire colony and where the praying mantis devours her mate after he plays his brief role), matriarchists reason their way up the biological chain, arriving at a view of man as the weaker of the sexes—weaker, that is, in terms of survival. There are interesting data to support this view. Although there are more boys born than girls, more girl babies survive their infancy; in addition, women (though called a minority) outnumber men. Why?

“Because women are more necessary to the survival of the species than men,” answers the matriarchist. After all, it takes only one male to fertilize hundreds of females, but human beings reproduce on a ratio of one mother to one offspring. Each woman is of vital importance; individual men are biologically expendable. Dedicated “superior” feminists trace the origin of the monogamous marriage and the patriarchal state back to the overthrow of an ancient mother-dominated society. There are matriarchists who hold that God is a female deity—the Mother Earth or the “Trunk of Life.”

At first glance, or even at second, this definition of woman seems too outlandish to take seriously. But there are moderate forms of “superior” feminism being expressed today. Sometimes it is men who express remnants of this philosophy when they speak of “momism” or express fear of the “castrating woman.” More often it is women, using the language of equal rights and the feminist movement, who imply that it is because women are superior that they have been subjugated by fearful males.

How would an army be constructed if matriarchists were at the national helm? Would it be an army of Amazons, with men employed as slaves or cannon fodder? Or would it be very much as it is now, with women being considered too valuable a national (and human) resource to be placed at risk? Perhaps the matriarchist's army would allow women to serve only in positions of relative physical safety. And perhaps the male soldiers would complain (as some do today), “Why do *they* get all the benefits of full service without having to face the dangers of combat?” Is it the fear of matriarchy that makes some men in the Army so resentful of such perceived female advantages as maternity leave and (perhaps disingenuously) longer hair standards?

• *Feminism—woman as absolutely equal to man.*

Feminism is not, as many believe, a modern movement or even a 20th-century development. It was first articulated as a philosophy in 1792 as part of a philosophical

attack against all forms of innatism, whether sexual, religious, racial, or political. Philosophers of the Enlightenment argued that all men were *created* equal, but that differences resulted from *environmental* inequalities; where opportunities were the same, men would exhibit essentially equal abilities.<sup>10</sup> Feminists in the 18th century believed that acceptance of the notion of environmental inequality required rejection of the notion of biological determinism. No person, no social class, and no gender possessed mental or physical or psychological advantages given deliberately by God (as in the innate theory).

Differences between soldier and statesman, noble and peasant, savage and gentleman, and man and woman could be explained . . . in terms of the unequal experiences and opportunities permitted each group by society.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary feminism as exemplified by the women's liberation movement of the early 1960s<sup>12</sup> rests upon the same basic argument of the feminism of 200 years ago. It is part of the "nurture-versus-nature" argument. All of those so-called differences between men and women—differences in their type of creativity, their intelligence, and their emotions (even their apparent physical dissimilarities)—are caused by the society, the environment, in which we are raised; they are not innately present at birth. "Masculinity" and "femininity" are cultural products of artificially assigned sex roles; they lack a biological basis. Men and women are absolutely equal; it follows, then, that they should be treated as absolute equals by society and all of its institutions, including the United States military establishment. So runs the feminist argument.

Just as many of us were born and raised in a society dominated by sexual innatism, so most of us have been affected, to a greater or lesser degree, by the equal-rights claims of feminism in the last 20 years. The basic tenet of feminism is an extension of the philosophy on which the United States was built. The idea of the basic equality of all human beings

is part of the American mystique, and we find it hard to argue against its sense of fairness and rightness. The Army is no exception. If one accepts the basic premise of feminism, then it is almost as difficult to argue against total equality for women in the Army as it is to argue against total equality for blacks in the Army.

The 1970s saw the Army, as a social institution, respond to the pressures of the feminist movement by making sweeping changes in its treatment of women. Laws and regulations that discriminated financially against women were changed. In a far-reaching decision, the Supreme Court made it possible for women with minor dependents to remain on active duty. The Women's Army Corps, judged to be protectionist and discriminatory, was eliminated. Women were integrated into units and MOSs that had previously been reserved for men only. All in all, the Army became a major instrument of social change (as did the other services). But as much as it has wanted to advertise itself as an equal opportunity employer, the Army has been stopped short of that goal by the issue of women in combat. And it has been that conflict, between the laudable desire to grant full equality to women and the unwillingness to equate equality with substitutability on the battlefield, that has caused so many personnel problems for the Army and its women. The Army has forced itself into the philosophical position that women are only "a little bit equal"; and, in an effort to satisfy both innatists and feminists, it has created an ever-changing jumble of personnel policies that dissatisfy both groups. The Army attempts to placate the women who long to wear the Infantry's crossed rifles by increasing the total number of women allowed in the Army; but then commanders argue that the presence of too many women in a given unit weakens its ability to function in combat. Attempts at resolution usually seem to degenerate into just another study.

At this point it might seem that we have covered all the bases. Women are either inferior to men, superior to men, or equal to men. What possible option remains? Actually, these three options, which tend to be

exclusive of one another, were the only ones considered until the 20th century. Then new scientific knowledge of human beings provided the basis for the formulation of a fourth philosophical position, a position that at first seems to be an eclectic selection from the other three but is truly a fourth option independent of the others.<sup>13</sup>

• *Differential equality—woman and man as different.*

Differential egalitarians believe that while both sexes share a large common set of abilities, each sex also possesses special skills that are directly or indirectly gender-related or -determined. Man and woman differ from one another in many ways, but each has special abilities that are indispensable to mankind. Thus differentialists cannot accept the feminist claim of absolute equality (if equal means substitutable—as in mathematics), since things that are different cannot be equal. They also see the futility of comparing women with men to see which sex is superior and which inferior—the two are not enough alike to be compared. Both men and women share an immense wealth of *human* characteristics; a certain group of skills is more prominent in the human female (language ability, for example), while another group of skills is more prominent in the human male (running ability, for example). Differential egalitarians claim that it has been in the interest of the human race for males to run fast and for females to verbalize well with their young, and that these skills, or predispositions, are inherited and gender-linked. Proponents cite 20th-century data in so-called tertiary sexual characteristics as a primary basis for their views. The science of endocrinology shows that male and female sex hormones affect not only the primary (genital) and the obvious secondary sites (breasts, facial hair, etc.), but virtually every tissue in the body, giving it a sexual nature. Thus egalitarians believe that the behavioral effects of male hormones and of female hormones can be modified but not changed by education, training, or any other aspect of the environment. Only by administering the male hormone to women and the female hormone to men can you come close to producing gender-free, sexually neuter (and,

therefore, equal) human beings.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find an “official” differential egalitarian view of women in the Army. First, most persons are not aware of that formal classification; a person who reasons his or her way to this position probably considers himself a “feminist with some reservations,” or a “liberal innatist.” Second, differentialists are not popular with the more militant and more published feminists, who feel that the differentialists have sold out to the chauvinist sexists. So differential egalitarians (even the label is difficult and does not lend itself to popular use) have not been very visible nor very vocal.

The basic tenets of this philosophy seem to be consistent, however, with the following view of women and the Army. Since women are basically different (not better nor worse nor the same, but *different*), the proper role of women in the Army will depend on a realistic understanding of the *Army*. It would be more profitable to study the Army—its physical, mental, and psychological demands—than to continue surveying and studying women. First understand the role of the soldier, then ask whether a woman’s special talents make her better suited than a man for that role. Perhaps they do. But, then, perhaps a man is better suited, or perhaps woman and man are equally suited. Compare the special talents of men and women against the standard, or standards, and select accordingly. Of course, this is an overly simplified, if not a naive, argument. It does not account for important social considerations, and it depends on our ability to clearly define the job of the soldier—a task we have not done well in the past.

The Women in the Army study is an attempt to move in this direction. It addresses the physical requirements for an MOS as one of the factors in determining the suitability of all soldiers for that MOS. Another factor, of course, is combat potential.

**T**he issue of women and combat must be part and parcel of any logical consideration of women’s role in the military service. For many of us, perhaps for most, combat becomes the bottom-line

consideration in determining how we view the role of women in the Army. The subject has already been written about and debated exhaustively, but perhaps it would be productive to address it here in terms of the combat role women would play under each of the four philosophies discussed.

- *The innatist view.* If the Army were to adopt a liberal innatist philosophy, women would not be assigned to combat branches nor MOSs, nor to areas with a probability of combat action; and their safety would be a matter of special official concern. A conservative innatist viewpoint would probably require a return to the Women's Army Corps or even to the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.

The innatist sees women as belonging, by nature, to the category of protectee, not protector. Just as individual women have male protectors within the family structure, our nation's womanhood is traditionally protected by the soldier. To many men, inculcated with the innatist principles common to our society, failure to adequately protect women is seen as dishonorable; and requiring, or allowing, women to be placed in a combat position would be proof of that failure. Male soldiers who adhere to this philosophy would be unable to treat female soldiers as equals. They would tend to protect them, perhaps even to the detriment of their mission.

- *The matriarchist view.* In my initial discussion of matriarchy I touched on the possible reactions of "superior" feminists to the question of women in combat. The answer to that question would seem to depend on whether women would be considered too valuable to be risked in combat, too superior to be put right in the thick of things. Practically speaking, the question is moot; the "Amazon mystique" belongs to either a mythological past or a far distant future, and the matriarchist view is thus largely irrelevant.

- *The feminist view.* If one follows the feminist argument to its logical end, one reaches the conclusion that the only reason women are not now serving in the Infantry is that sexist elements in our society exert

enough pressure to preclude such a possibility. Since feminists see no real difference between the sexes that cannot be virtually eliminated by such environmental tools as education and physical training, they can see no reason to make an exception for women in combat. Feminists demand for women the right to serve their country and society in the same full measure as men. (Or they demand that men have the same right as women to avoid combat service. If you say to a feminist, "I don't want my daughter to be trained to kill people," he or she may well reply, "I don't want my son to be trained to kill people, either.")

An Army truly committed to a feminist philosophy would view American womanhood as a virtually untapped resource. It would remove all classification and assignment restrictions save those based on strength alone. (Feminists are generally unhappy about the empirical data indicating that most men have greater brute strength than most women, but few try to argue that there are no such data.)

- *The differential egalitarian view.* If the Army were to adopt this philosophy as the basis for its policies on women in combat, it would probably study combat more and women less. The differentialist recognizes that a woman has special strengths and certain weaknesses by virtue of her gender. Whether she is properly suited for a combat role would depend on how that role, or job, is defined. What are the physical, mental, psychological, and emotional demands placed on most combatants? Can most women meet those demands? If the answer is yes, then barring consideration of sociological factors and the psychological effect on men (very important areas, but outside the scope of this article), women should be considered a combat asset and assigned accordingly. If the answer is no, then a series of graduated restrictions would seem appropriate. Empirical data (from studies addressing how women might perform in *combat*, not in combat *units*) might justify any position from a selected combat role for women to a return to the "separate but equal" status of the Women's Army Corps.

There is a special problem with defining the differentialist's point of view. As I mentioned earlier, it can appear to be an eclectic selection from the three other philosophies. Consider the following views on women in combat expressed by Major General Jeanne Holm (USAF, Retired), former Director of Women in the Air Force, and Brigadier General Elizabeth Hoisington (USA, Retired), former Director, Women's Army Corps.

General Holm: "I see no reason for any restrictions on the use of women as members of combat air crews. I see no reason why they should not serve aboard combat ships."<sup>14</sup>

Sound like a feminist? Yes. But if you read more of General Holm you will find that she has serious reservations about *Army* women in combat. In other words, she recognizes the vastly different combat roles of the airman, the sailor, and the soldier. And the ability to make this careful distinction in the job, while maintaining a consistent policy toward women, is one of the advantages of arguing from the differentialist's point of view.

General Hoisington: "In my whole lifetime, I have never known 10 women who I thought could endure three months under actual combat conditions in an Army unit."<sup>15</sup>

Sounds like a conservative innatist? Yes. But it could also be the view of a differentialist making an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of women in regard to the special qualifications required in a combat role.

**T**he four philosophies described in this article, each with a range of liberal and conservative interpretations, present a wide and perhaps confusing choice. And the

adoption of any one of the four philosophies would lead to the selection of policies and actions that would be unpopular with advocates of any of the other three. Yet failure to choose one of them has resulted in policy decisions that are inconsistent, illogical, and transitory. It is thus in the best interest of the Army and of its women that the Army's leadership make that choice.

#### NOTES

1. US Department of the Army, *Women in the Army Policy Review* (Washington: Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, 1982).
2. Larry Carney and Don Herst, "Physical Tests to Decide Work," *Army Times*, 6 September 1982, p. 1.
3. Pete Earley, "New Tests for Strength Will Bar Most Women From 76% of Army Jobs," *The Washington Post*, 31 August 1982, p. A2.
4. Allen E. Carrier, "Army-Women Study Draws More Criticism," *Army Times*, 27 December 1982, p. 2.
5. H. Carleton Marlow and Harrison M. Davis, *The American Search for Woman* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Clio, 1976).
6. Jeanne Holm, *Women In The Military, An Unfinished Revolution* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982), p. 68.
7. This is, however, not necessarily an innatist view; it could be egalitarian.
8. William C. Westmoreland, "Why US Must Return to the Draft," *U.S. News and World Report*, 12 May 1980, p. 36.
9. Marlow and Davis, p. 196.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-17.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
12. We must distinguish between two schools that claim this movement: environmental feminists claim absolute equality between the sexes; "superior" feminists believe that women must be liberated because they are in subjugation to the inferior sex.
13. Marlow and Davis, p. 253.
14. Jeanne Holm, "Should Women Fight in War?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 February 1978, p. 53.
15. Elizabeth Hoisington, "Should Women Fight in War?" *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 February 1978, p. 53.

